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NEW THEATRE MAGAZINE

JOHN NEVILLE
The Actor's Viewpoint

BRIAN WAY . JOHN ENGLISH
PETER CHEESEMAN

MICHAEL ANDERSON
Interview with Stephen Lewis

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Arnold Wesker and The Workers

"O, MOTHER, IS IT WORTH IT ?" pleads Arnold Wesker. He is talking about playwriting, and he is posing this question to the Trades Union Congress and the Labour Movement. But he is not merely sounding a rhetorical flourish or striking a fashionable attitude; he isn't stating the usual pious platitudes about success not being everything. He is identifying himself, genuinely and wholeheartedly, with an attempt to make drama what it has not been in this country for some three hundred and fifty years—an integral and valuable part of the life of the whole community.

Mr. Wesker argues persuasively that the theatre is not like that at the moment, and nobody would disagree with him :—

Before one can answer the question " O, Mother is it worth it ?" there arise, I think, three subsidiary questions :

(1) Do I make enough money to survive ?
(2) Am I writing what I want to write ?
(3) Is anybody listening ?

To the first—yes ! Not only do I make enough money to survive, but I'm managing to do a bit of living also, and take some others along with me. To the second—yes ! I have at no point compromised and done work that I at least did not consider worthwhile. So—I am writing what I want to write, but of the third question—" Is anybody listening ?"— this is the real question, and I suppose should have been the title of my address, because in answering *this* question, you come up against what to me is *the* problem. The answer is—No—nobody's listening, except a few quiet columns in the press, those who have already heard it before anyway, and of course, one's mother.

Let's look at a few of Mr. Findlater's facts from his Fabian pamphlet, "The Future of the Theatre." I don't know what the adult population of Britain is, but I'm not greatly distorting the picture if we work on the total. The total is roughly 58 million. Now, out of these, 200,000 go to the theatre each night, as compared with two million who go to the cinema and four million who watch T.V. Usually, statistics mean very little to me, but this means a lot. You know what it means ? It means nobody's listening. The question I asked my mum is still relevant.

So let's go on—let's ask more questions. Who are the 200,000 who do go to the theatre ? I'm not sure I know, but we might get some idea by a process of elimination. Are they the girls who work in the offices; are they the men who work in the coal-mines ? Are they dockers, farm labourers, steel men, bricklayers, car makers, railwaymen, or that new twentieth - century target for the advertisers — the housewife ? I'm not even asking about the new civilization which the *Daily Mirror* has discovered for us called " the teenagers." Is it any of these ? Again the answer is obvious : 40 million into 200,000 doesn't go.

I am quoting from a pamphlet called *The Modern Playwright*. The text was originally delivered by Arnold Wesker in a talk at the Student Drama Festival last year; then it was published by the magazine *Gemini,* and finally, in pamphlet form, it was, as a note on the title page proclaims, "sent to the Secretary of every trade union in the country."

To those whose experience of the Trades Unions is restricted to what they read in the papers about strikes, and see in the cinema in films like *I'm All Right, Jack* and *The Angry Silence,* Mr. Wesker may seem to have chosen a strange course. But he specifically labels the films I have mentioned as " travesties." He believes that the Trades Unions should be capable of something more constructive than internal squabbling and irresponsible campaigns for higher wages. And he is not alone in his belief. For example there is Bill Holdsworth, who in an introductory letter to Mr. Wesker's pamphlet says :—

During the last fifteen years of committee meeting and conferences I have come to realize that

the efforts for shorter hours and higher pay is only the beginning of the Labour Movement's work.

The responsibility for obtaining a first rate and exciting cultural environment is ours also. If we are not to be materially exploited neither should we be culturally exploited. 'I'm alright, Jack,' is a sick cultural manifestation as well as a social one, and for this reason I hope you will respond to what Arnold Wesker has to say.

The Belgrade Theatre, Coventry, is a proof that these conceptions can be carried forward into positive action. For the impetus behind a civic theatre must come in the first place, not from artists working in the theatre, but from elected representatives of the people. Leicester's Civic Theatre may be another such example, and so could the Nottingham Playhouse, if it is ever built.

And so when another pamphlet followed hot upon the first on to the desks of Union secretaries, proposing that the TUC should concern itself actively with the arts, this was not the impracticable suggestion of an artist remote from everyday possibilities; it contained suggestions for which a precedent in the form of civic action already exists in England. The text of the proposal begins as follows :—

That the Trades Union Congress of Great Britain should set up a commission to investigate and discuss what relationship the Trade Union Movement should have to the cultural life of the community. And in any such investigation the following suggestions should be considered :

1. That half a dozen unions be responsible for building and supporting new theatres in industrial centres where theatres do not exist; and, or in particular be responsible for the building of a National Theatre before big business builds it as part of a "soft advertising" campaign. The Belgrade Theatre, Coventry, is a prime example of what could be done. The artistic directors could be found among the new group that have grown up around the Royal Court Theatre and Theatre Workshop.
2. That support be given to the existing film unit of ACTT so that its production programme can be expanded and experiment made possible. Directors could be found among the new, exciting and socially conscious young men who have emerged from the "Free Cinema" movement.

It goes on to propose a Trades Union orchestra and publishing house, art exhibitions, yearly competitions, and "grants to assist the members' children who show talent in any artistic sphere." Often one hears the proposals summed up in the words : "Arnold Wesker has told the Trades Unions to build their own theatres." But in fact that is only part of a wider and more comprehensive plan, embracing all the arts. "Art", he says, "Is the heritage of the whole nation and the Trade Union Movement is the only body which represents and is in contact with that majority of the community to whom art, by tradition only, does not yet belong."

So far so good. Mr. Wesker's proposals are serious, they are disinterested, and they have some sort of precedent. (And he quotes examples from the United States, Norway, Israel and Japan of Trades Unions that sponsor theatres, orchestras and publishing firms.) But just how practicable are they here today ? Would they work in Britain ?

The snag about pamphlets is that they only state one side of a case. Mr. Wesker's two publications overlook the tremendous practical objections that can be raised against them; for that reason they are likely to receive lip service and not much else, or they will be simply ignored. One suspects that this process has already started at this year's Trades Union Congress. A motion inspired by Arnold Wesker's proposals was passed with unanimous approval; and we know already how far unanimous approval

gets anyone when a National Theatre is involved. And the Editorial of the latest issue of *Encore* dismissed the plan in a single paragraph of congratulation. Detailed disagreement, heated argument, a conflict of ideas would in both cases have been far more welcome; they would have shown that Arnold Wesker was being taken seriously. It is only when the objections to the scheme have been raised that they can be overcome.

Mr. Wesker seems to support the idea that a theatre has only to be built with Trades Union backing, and installed with an imaginative director, for the habit of theatre-going to follow surely among the workers. The belief which runs right through Mr. Wesker's documents is that in the majority of workers there lies dormant an enthusiasm to take part in the cultural life of the nation—that it is only something that has to be awakened :—

> There have come about changes over the last century and a half, wrought by organisations like the Labour Party and the Trade Unions, that have created a state of affairs where there is opportunity for everybody. It is now possible—because of the economic advantages gained by the Unions and the socialist parties—for everyone to read books from the libraries, listen to concerts on the radio, visit the theatres and in general take part in the cultural life of the community.
>
> But one thing was forgotten—and this is to me the terrible crux of the problem and God knows how they missed it. The social and cultural habits of a group will continue for generations unless something is done to break them just as much as the economic habits will continue unless action is taken to weaken them. It was necessary for the unions and the Labour Party to take political action in order to convince the worker that the habit of taking ridiculously small wages for long hours was a useless habit. They had to make efforts to convince the stultified worker that he was as entitled to a fair share of the nation's economic life as anyone—but what action was taken to convince the stultified worker that he was just as entitled to his share of the nation's cultural life? Of course he's not listening—no one's suggested to him that it might be of any interest, that it has a value for him.

This is basically a very dangerous doctrine, because it assumes a scheme of things where any work of art that is not immediately comprehensible to the lowest common denominator is at fault. In Russia this has led to a style of painting which is bettered by our own railway posters, while achievements in theatre and ballet are largely restricted to revivals of the pre-revolutionary classics. The Trades Unions must beware lest, by accepting too eagerly the assurances of Mr. Wesker, they find themselves saddled with theatres that are uneconomic, unrealistic, and outdated even before they are built.

Outdated ? There is a fact which has not been sufficiently noticed; indeed I have never heard or seen it mentioned in connection with the subject of the theatre and the working classes. It is that since the sweeping changes after the war, the working classes have not only become smaller, not only had some of their grievances removed; they have become *different*. Before the war, the working classes *were* full of people deprived of the education and culture that was their right. And it was the determination of such people that their children should not be starved of these things, that brought the Trades Union Movement into being, and later produced the post-war social revolution. One of the immediate results of this has been that hardly any child, whatever his background may be, is prevented from receiving the education that is his due. The people who twenty years ago would have formed just such a part of the working classes as Mr. Wesker wants to approach with art, are now educated to their full capacity. They enter industry to join the technocracy; they become schoolteachers

or university lecturers; some become artists and writers—but they have *left the working classes.* Others, becoming apprenticed and working their way into a "trade", leave for the cocoon existence of the Council House estate.

This may be a good thing; it may be a bad thing; but it is a fact, and it has got to be faced. The mass advertisers who control independent television recognize and exploit it; so too do the publishers of the semi-pornographic literature that is on sale in grubby little bookshops in most working-class areas. It is not now profitable to approach the working classes with a serious artistic purpose.

And unless we are hit by war or a major economic disaster, this trend will continue. Any approach to art which involves the conception of the working classes as a community capable of sustaining *on their own* a valuable culture, will lead to a cheapening of that art, or a failure of the artist to make any communication. Arnold Wesker does not hint that this may be the case—because he is writing a pamphlet—but until such objections are brought out into the open, nothing will be done about his proposals.

For I don't believe that this means that the situation is hopeless, or that the theatre will continue to be a middle-class diversion until such time as it eventually peters out. But new social and cultural patterns are emerging in the nation, and they have got to be explored scientifically by anyone who wants to see the theatre become an integral part of the life of the community.

It is not enough to say that the working classes have a right to the cultural heritage of the nation, and that money should be spent to see that they get it. For there is an enormous danger that to follow such an argument to its logical conclusion, would nowadays be to cheapen any art form. If the theatres that the Trades Unions build are not to stand as empty and desolate monuments to idealists who did not look before they leapt, they must appeal to students as well as errand boys, to school-teachers as well as steelworkers. It was the virtue of Elizabethan drama, that it did not attract merely the intellectual, or merely the lower classes of London; its appeal, involving the emotions and the intellect of every member of the audience to their fullest capacity, was universal. The same was true, believe it or not, of Greek tragic drama. And for the first time this century, plays with a similar universal appeal are being written today. The reason why this new drama is not popular drama in the true sense of the word, is that somewhere between the old upper-middle classes and what remains of the true working classes, a vast new classless anarchy is growing—it is composed of intelligent and serious-minded people who can and one day will form the cultural backbone of the nation, but it is as yet an anarchy because it is incoherent; it has behind it no powerful organisation like the Trades Unions or the Establishment. And because these people have no voice, they have no theatre.

We hear of attempts to woo the working-classes into the theatre, and we know that the average repertory company relies on the support of the dwindling upper-middle classes. But where are the appeals to those who would deny their allegiance to either class—the graduate with a working-class background working in industry, the majority of students, the ordinary office-worker ?

The cultural vacuum is not the exclusive property of the working-classes, and unless the TUC is prepared to look beyond the narrow confines of an outdated class prejudice, anything that they may do by

way of helping to bring the theatre and other arts into wider play, is likely to be more expensive than valuable. It is significant that most of the countries Mr. Wesker cites—the United States, Scandinavia and Israel—as possessing Trades Unions that sponsor the arts, are countries where for differing reasons the working classes have practically merged with the middle classes.

If the TUC, or the Labour Movement as a whole, is to progress, it will have to accept that it is not just the material well-being of just the once underprivileged classes that they have to cater for. If the TUC is to take up Mr. Wesker's challenge, it will first have to revise drastically its conception of the role it plays in modern society. I wish there were some indications that it is ready to do so. For until that day, it looks as if Mr. Wesker will have to tell his mother that it isn't worth it, after all.

MICHAEL ANDERSON

The Actor's Viewpoint

JOHN NEVILLE

" The Actor's Viewpoint " is the text of a talk delivered by John Neville to the Conference on the Architecture of New Theatres held at the Institute of Advanced Architectural Studies, York, 9-13th September, 1960.

LET ME SAY straight away that I'm not an architect; I'm an actor. But I'm an actor who is genuinely concerned about the kind of theatre that we have in this country. And these are merely a few random thoughts about the exciting possibilities in theatre design which I have turned over in my mind in the years that I have spent in the theatre. I've only been in the theatre for twelve years, but during that time I have acted, and seen many varying types of theatre building, in this country and abroad — I've had two six-month tours of America and I've been to Holland, France, Denmark, Norway, Belgium and Jugoslavia —and I am forced to the inevitable conclusion that they do all of these things better abroad.

I shall probably state many things that may seem very obvious, but I shall state them, not in order to be very dogmatic or attack anything at all, but because I am searching for a solution, in much the same way as I know that architects are searching for it.

It seems, then, to state an obvious fact, that an architect ought to have a thorough, practical, working knowledge of the theatre. Is this possible ? I haven't got a practical working knowledge of architecture, and an architect may well ask how he can have a corresponding knowledge of the day-to-day working of the theatre. Then I say that if this is an impossibility, and if an architect who is building a theatre does not possess the practical knowledge that I think he ought to have, then he should have the benefit of the accumulated advice and experience of all the best technical, creative and artistic workers who are practising their craft in the theatre from day to day and have been over many years. I know how obvious this sounds as a general principle; but we must ask ourselves

whether it has not possibly been lost sight of in the almost negligible amount of theatre-building that has taken place in this country during the last thirty years. To be honest, I think that we have to admit that it has.

I worked at the Bristol Old Vic Theatre for about three and a half years, and during that time I worked closely with the stage designer, who had come into the theatre by accident, so to speak; he was in fact trained as an architect. We know more recently that one of our more popular stage designers, Sean Kenny, is also an architect. It seems that people like this, with their day-to-day working knowledge of the theatre, would be ideally suited to contribute advice to architects on many aspects of theatre design—what things will work under certain circumstances, what things won't. The carpenters, the designers, all should help to contribute this advice, and in particular the stage directors, who are actively concerned with every function of the theatre in order to " run the show " for the evening.

What I am really coming to is this: while in this country we *may* " never have had it so good " the amount of money that we are going to get for theatre-building seems likely to be almost negligible—we certainly don't seem to be getting it from the Government, whichever political party is in power. Therefore it seems to me that while we're getting so little money, we ought really to be sure that it's put to the best use. Mistakes such as have been made are a *luxury;* they cannot be afforded. We mustn't repeat these mistakes; we must learn from them.

I think it would be an extremely good idea if the State were to set aside immediately a large sum of money purely and simply for research into this problem—so that when we do get the rare opportunity to build, the chance of repeating our previous errors is minimised, and we are ready to build fine, new theatres.

Now to come to the more particular points of the problem; that is to say, the sort of theatre that we want. I think that the kind of theatre building that we have ought to reflect our modern age; it ought to progress, or try to progress. I fail to see how theatre-building can do this if it continues along completely traditional lines. The most important new building in the West End, the Royalty, is of a completely conventional design. Why ?

We ought to ask ourselves whether the theatre, as a building, is an ordinary part of our everyday life, or should be something special, something exceptional. For myself, I think that it should be something exceptional. I don't think that it ought to be confused, from the outside or the inside, with a public building or a bank or a public lavatory. An architect should ask himself what effect the building is going to have from the moment the audience see it, as well as when they pass through the foyer and into the auditorium. Is the building going to help to get them ready to participate in the particular form of drama that they're going to see ? It ought to help the transition; it ought to go some way towards creating the climate, the atmosphere, the mood in which the audience finally sits down to see the play.

And I would prefer, too, the theatre that has only one entrance for the public, rather like London's new Mermaid Theatre. I don't agree with the old-fashioned, dated, snobbish idea that the rich should go in through the main entrance, while the rest of the public reaches the cheaper seats through an entrance round the corner.

Another point that I have thought over for some years, is that it seems that the theatre as a building in our life, is really

only doing its work for about two and a half hours out of the twenty four; in these days when we're so wildly concerned with economics — quite naturally — it would surely be an advantage if the theatre was not only a theatre, but also an Arts Centre, and if all the bars, spacious and *chic,* could be used for exhibitions—some connected with the play, others of more general appeal —as well as for lectures, concerts, poetry readings, jazz and so on.

Naturally an actor wants comfortable conditions to work in, and while I recognize that most actors, if they were given the Ritz or the Savoy to change in, would still complain, I think that we've gone too far the other way in the past. In my travels, not only in this country but in America, where they're much worse about it than we are, I have found the conditions for getting ready to put the play on simply frightening. In the States you have to travel with your own plug for the sink, because you know very well there won't be one when you get to the place; it becomes part of your make-up equipment. And one is dressed in rooms which are not only so tiny that you couldn't turn round in them (and of course for Shakespeare space is very important, with the number of costumes one has) but are really disgustingly filthy.

When we come to the actual equipment, and the stage itself, this seems to me to be a very good case in point for taking advice from people who really know about the working of a theatre. I believe it is true that there is not enough wing space in the new Royalty Theatre in London, that the sight lines are not good and that you can see the actors preparing to make their entrances from the wings. It's quite natural that architects shouldn't necessarily know about these things; but why should these mistakes be made when there are so many people who've been working many years—much longer than I have — in the theatre, with a vast practical knowledge which is available ?

I think a lot of these points arise because, over the years, those of us who have been in charge of the theatre have looked upon it as a thing for making money : it's something we sell. This point of view I am out of sympathy with—I think that the theatre should be in the hands of idealists. And while you are looking on it as something you are going to sell, and make a profit out of, then certain aspects of the building will always be skimped—especially the dressing-rooms.

Up to the present day all our theatre progress, such as it is, has taken place in buildings that do not differ essentially from Italian Renaissance Opera Houses; this is hardly conducive to exciting new developments. Speaking from the actor's point of view, I think it is cramping to have to work in buildings that are dated, conventional and antiquated. I think that the Renaissance Opera House style is fine for very grand things, like opera, musical comedy or melodrama. But I think there are other expanding, exploring kinds of drama where we need other kinds of building, other forms of theatre, if the actor's style is not to be cramped.

Over the five and a half years that I worked at the Old Vic, the directors who came there tried in many ways to change this Victorian music-hall into a theatre that was suitable for presenting Shakespeare. (For it isn't really suitable. Contrary to popular belief, Shakespeare ought not to be belted across in a huge auditorium.) After seeing the attempts of all these directors, I have come to the conclusion that it's best in a way not to try to do anything at all. Whatever you do, the building will never be ideally suitable for playing Shakespeare in.

In this connection, I must of course mention the example set by Dr. Tyrone Guthrie, our great Shakespeare producer, who developed an open stage for the Edinburgh Festival, in the Assembly Hall of the Elders of the Kirk of Scotland. I've played four times in different productions at the Assembly Hall; the last time I played in it we took a production of *Twelfth Night* there, prior to taking it to America. It had already had some success in London. I can only say that the play never went so well, before or after, as it did on that open stage. There was something quite amazing and electric about the actor-audience relationship there.

From his experience in Edinburgh, Tyrone Guthrie developed the very wonderful theatre which I have seen at Stratford, Ontario, where the stage is similar, as far as we can tell, to the one that Shakespeare's actors played on. The audience goes around three sides of it, and yet although it seats over two thousand no member of the audience is more than about seventy feet from the actor. Immediately a wonderful actor-audience relationship is set up; and I think this should be an important factor in modern theatre design.

We've got to find out the forms of theatre that will vitally attract a modern audience; and very often the proscenium theatre fails in this. Rather than sit in a darkened room looking at an opening at the end of a long tunnel, people would sooner sit at home and watch TV, because it's exactly the same kind of thing. I think we'll get a new actor-audience relationship out of these new forms—something that's quite new and dynamic. Then we'll get more of the audience back again, particularly in the provinces. But first it's got to be tried; at the moment it isn't being tried.

For some years I have considered the possibilities of a theatre that can be adaptable, that is to say that it can be a theatre-in-the-round, or an open stage, or a proscenium stage theatre at will. Now I'm told by people who know much more about architecture — and certainly about theatre architecture—than I do, that unless you use an enormous sum of money this is not really possible, because in the end you will get the worst of all three systems. Now I realise that there would be tremendous difficulties about this but I don't think they ought to be insurmountable; and this in one of the things that research should be done on. I would challenge the complaint that vast sums of money will have to be spent; I think this is a very old excuse for not building theatres. I think that research can and should be made into finding newer and cheaper ways of building theatres, for places that haven't got theatres. As I say, I think that ideally the theatre ought to be a building that's composite, that can change for differing forms of drama. But if we can't get that, I certainly want theatres that are in keeping with our modern life and its progress, and not replicas of Italian Renaissance Opera Houses in very narrowly differing styles.

I should like to see every big city with its own open stage theatre as well as a proscenium theatre, and with its own theatre-in-the-round. We have only two theatres-in-the-round in this country. One is a touring theatre, and is makeshift; and the other, a permanent one at Croydon, is an old hall converted, and again is makeshift. So that all the criticism that theatre-in-the-round and the open stage have come in for, is based on makeshift buildings, and is not really valid.

A good deal of the opposition to these new forms is merely blind prejudice. A lot of actors that I've talked to say they would

hate acting in the round; they feel that they would be exposed, and subject to more of a strain. And audiences say "I couldn't bear to see a performance in the round, because I'd see the faces of the audience opposite." They'd cheerfully go to a boxing match, or a football match, and see the same thing. But I have found that a great many plays that we're told won't work in the round actually do. I've seen productions in America, where I went myself sceptical about the possibilities — I didn't think that Turgenev's *Month in the Country* could be performed in the round, but I went to a performance at the Arena Theatre in Washington and saw one of the most beautiful performances of a play of that period that I've ever seen.

In this country we have not one permanent open-stage theatre, and not one permanent theatre-in-the-round. Those of us who work in the theatre shouldn't be leading the architects; I feel that they should lead us. I think it's only because architects don't have enough practical experience of the theatre, that they are giving us conventional out-dated theatres at the moment, and often faulty ones at that. It isn't that they don't *want* to give us exciting new theatres.

It seems to me that we are in a lamentable situation, where we're fighting a rearguard action against the Philistines who are tearing theatres down; the only pathetic token resistance we can make, is to insist that where a theatre is pulled down, and a block of offices or some other ghastly thing is being put up, a small theatre should be built in the basement; this is what's happened at the Royalty. This is an appalling situation in a country such as ours, which has an incredibly long and powerful tradition of theatre and should not be in the rearguard of the battle for a theatre of progress and advancement. We shall never get good theatres by making them excuses.

I believe that the State must eventually subscribe money for theatre-building; but we must find other ways of getting the enormous sum that is needed for theatres, whether it be from industry, or whether it be along the lines of Arnold Wesker's plan to get the TUC to build theatres. It must be done. I want to see theatres built; actors want to see theatres going up, and not only in London—there are enough theatres there anyway—but all over the country. But we don't want them to be apologies for theatres—something built in the basement of some soulless block of offices. I want us to lead the world for a change, and to be safe in the knowledge that these buildings can house proudly the glory and enrichment that is our culture and drama.

A full report on the Conference on the Architecture of New Theatres will appear in the next issue of "New Theatre Magazine."

Stephen Lewis Replies

Q: WHAT first made you take up the theatre as a profession ?

A: I used to work in the building trade; some friends of mine used to go to Theatre Workshop, and they asked me if I'd come along one night. I saw some of the plays here and liked them, and that's how I developed an interest in the theatre. Just before I came here a friend of mine was in an amateur play at Tinsbury Park, and he invited me to go there with him. I got the part of Lennie in *Of Mice and Men* (that was type casting !) Then I heard they were doing a play about the building trade here and I asked if it was possible that I could do anything. I didn't really think I'd get a job but Joan Littlewood gave me a bit of an audition and I was given a part because I seemed to be a good building trade worker —I didn't know anything about acting, but I knew more about the building trade than any of the actors. The play was *You Won't Always be on Top,* by Henry Chapman, and it went off very well. After that I had parts in a few plays and also worked in television and films; but I preferred it at Theatre Workshop—I liked working with Joan Littlewood when I began to understand what she was doing and the way she worked. Then I had a part in *The Hostage.* While I was in this (over a year) I began to develop as an actor, and I also took up the idea of writing.

I came to the conclusion that I'd like to write a play if I could, and I suppose I had a different sort of angle about it from most people. Being a working-class man myself, it always seemed to me that people weren't talking about the working class in the right way; they weren't showing them as they really are. So I determined to write about them and present them exactly as they are, in my opinion. And when I tried to figure out a way to do this, without being prejudiced one way or another, I decided to set about writing a play that would not tell a story or carry a plot, but would literally be a slice of life. I believe that a plot would have distracted from the people themselves. I used to write in the daytime, taking notes, etc., act in *The Hostage* in the evening, and at night I typed it out.

While I was writing the play I came to certain conclusions on what it should be like, and what it should be about. Instead of writing purely for entertainment, I am writing for a specific purpose. I don't feel like a writer who belongs to a certain section of the people and is writing for them, but like one of a different section who is writing about them for other people's benefit. I have started a second play which I have nearly finished, and I am part of the way through a third, and that is still my intention. I regard myself as one of *us* talking to *them.* I am still deliberately leaving this idea of plots and a story out of it in order to present just the people themselves.

Q: What happened after you had written the play ?

A: I sent it to Joan Littlewood, but she was just producing *Fings Ain't What They Used To Be* and *Make me an Offer,* and so she was very busy and had no time to read any plays at all. But later on one day she 'phoned me up at the theatre and said that she'd like to do it.

STEPHEN LEWIS was interviewed by Birgit Rommel at the Theatre Royal, Stratford, London, where his play " Sparrers Can't Sing " was running.

Q: Could you tell us how it was produced ?

A: She produced the play in just the way I saw it. Joan Littlewood comes from East London herself and she knew the sort of people I was talking about. So she aimed for complete realism. For instance, we have music in the show, and people sometimes sing; but they sing from out of the mood they're in, or from hearing the music, which we assume is coming from a pub. But people don't stop and sing a set number as they do in a musical. We aim for truth in this play. It's a comedy, but the comedy comes from situations, not just funny lines. And they're all true situations—they're *not* larger than life.

I'd always heard that in the theatre people and situations should be larger than life. Frankly when I went to the theatre I never saw anything larger than life; I always thought people outside were much bigger. I don't think it possible for an actor, however brilliant he is, to really know a character well enough after a period of four weeks to say he is larger than that person. It takes you a lifetime of living next door to a person to know what he's like, so I don't think an actor could possibly do it. He can only get as far as the surface of the things; and the same applies to a writer. He can't really know all about life, he can only see the superficial side of most of it, and for that reason I wouldn't attempt to write about any other sort of people except those I know—not at the moment.

Q: Ann Jellicoe says : " Ideally speaking, a playwright is the very best person to produce his own play." What do you think about this ?

A: I disagree. A producer has got to be absolutely ruthless when he's working on a new play, and I don't think any writer can bring himself to be ruthless enough about his own work. There are bound to be scenes that he gets attached to, and he won't want to lose them or change them.

Q: Do you think that the theatre is in need of a new type of building, or a new type of stage, at present ?

A: Not necessarily. I don't see anything wrong with the old sort of stage. I've seen plays in the round, and they weren't any better than plays in the normal type of theatre. Now, when you see a bad play, or bad acting, in a proscenium theatre, you may start thinking that there's something wrong with the theatre. But when you see a good play, and good acting, you don't notice anything wrong, do you ? I don't think that a change to a new type of staging is necessarily going to give us better plays. It's the quality of the writing and the acting that matters, and they can be good or bad in either case; it's only when they're bad that you start looking around for something new.

Q: Theatre Workshop has a very distinct style of acting. Could you say something about how this is achieved ?

A: Well, I haven't worked under many producers besides Joan Littlewood, and so I don't know much about the methods they use in other theatres. But here we try to find the truth in each particular scene—the " objective," as it's called by Stanislavsky. And then we try to find the truth of the whole play, which is the " super-objective." This doesn't mean to say that a play has got to be realistic : for instance *The Hostage* isn't a realistic type of play, but we approached that by looking for the truth that the writer was expressing in each scene.

Q: How does this work out for the actors ?

A: We start off by trying to find out, with the producer, what are the objectives of the various characters in the play. We do this in all sorts of ways, by discussions, by

improvising scenes, sometimes we take each other's parts. We aim to get to know as much as we can about the characters. It isn't enough just to know the lines you have to say on the stage. You have to know where you've been before you come on, why you're coming on, what you're thinking when you say a thing.

Q: What happens if the actor disagrees with the producer over this ?

A: Joan Littlewood doesn't work by forcing her own opinions on the actor. If an actor can genuinely convince her that what he's getting at is the truth about a character, then she'll accept his views. But he's got to be able to convince her.

Q: Did you have any surprises about the characters in your own play, when you were working on it in this way ?

A: Not really. In this play, it was chiefly a question of getting the actors to know how people in East London really think and talk. I used to take some of the actors who weren't accustomed to this around places in East London, so that they could get to know the sort of people that the play is about.

Q: Don't you think this style of production tends to disregard certain important things : for instance timing, or playing together ?

A: No, it doesn't mean that. For instance, say you've got a funny line, and you don't bother about the character or the situation, but you just play it for effect, then of course you'll get a laugh. But say you don't trouble yourself about consciously trying to make it funny, but just concentrate on the truth of what you are doing; then you'll still get a laugh, but it'll be a different sort of laugh, because it'll come out of the character and the situation—it'll be more than just a music-hall joke.

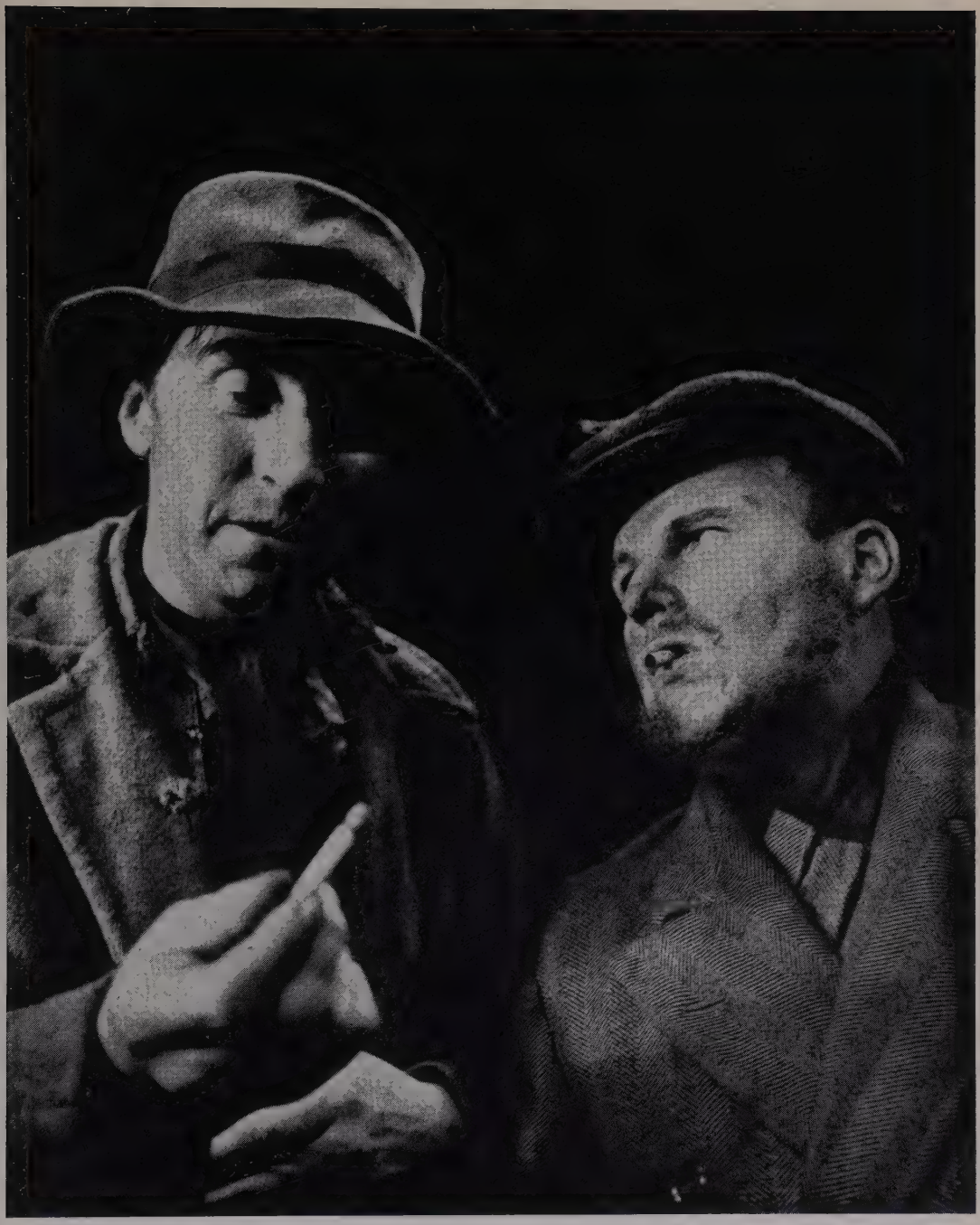
Q: To return to your own play, *Sparrers Can't Sing:* how would you define its " super-objective "?

A: It's to present the people of East London as they really are, not as writers and others imagine them to be.

Q: But is there any political or social motive as well, behind the writing of your play ?

A: Yes, there is. People have criticised my play by saying that I try to force a culture on to East End people, to show them as possessing something they haven't really got. Well that's not true. I don't believe they do have any culture, and I don't try to show that they have. But I think it's wrong that they don't. I believe that everybody should have a right to have a culture, and that's one of the reasons why I wrote the play. But I haven't put my beliefs into the mouths of the characters, because I don't think that's a true or a fair way of putting them forward. I have very strong opinions about politics and religion, but if I were to make those characters say what I wanted them to say all the time, then they wouldn't be real people, because not everybody thinks the same as I do. Therefore I thought it would be false to get the characters expressing my opinions; and in any case I thought that the people must be strong enough on their own, and able to speak for themselves.

Sparrers Can't Sing



[*Photo : Jeff Vickers*

Stephen Lewis, author of "Sparrers Can't Sing", as Hearthstone Harry in the Theatre Workshop production (left). With him is Roy Kinnear as Sid.

The Exception and the Rule

[*Photo : Raymonds*

The British premiere of this play by Brecht was presented, in a translation by Goronwy Rees, at the Derby Playhouse last February,

Repertory in Derby

PETER CHEESEMAN

DERBY
County Borough

POPULATION : 135,000

MAIN INDUSTRIES :

Rolls-Royce aero-engine factories
B.R. Carriage and Loco. works
British Celanese Ltd.
Pottery works

DERBY is not, as many people seem to imagine, a market town like Bakewell, even though it stands on the edge of the beautiful Peak district; it has been an industrial centre since Sir John Lombe built the first British silk mill in Derby in 1717. It is, in fact, a town in the middle of the Midlands, with a remarkable lack of character : a place where everyone seems to be in transit. And it has no university to act as a focus for any kind of cultural life, only a very small art gallery, and no concert hall whatever.

There have been four theatres in the town. The Theatre of 1772, plain and symmetrical-fronted, was occupied by the Methodists early in the 19th century and is now a library. The Grand Theatre, a vast Victorian building closed not long after the war, is now called the Locarno and occupied by dancing teenagers. The Hippodrome, an Edwardian building intended, like the Grand, to take touring shows, became a variety theatre and finally a commercial repertory company a few years ago before closing its doors. It sold its grand piano for a fiver last year and is still empty. The cinemas are few and two have closed in the last six months.

Derby Playhouse is the only live theatre still open. It was a chapel originally and theatre economics have seen to it that it looks very little different from a chapel even now; it lies at the junction of two very dirty streets uncomfortably off the centre of the town, and is almost indistinguishable from the neighbouring rows of little red houses. The Playhouse began as a Club theatre in 1948 when three thousand enthusiasts, presumably dissatisfied with the commercial theatre then existing in the town and seeking some kind of cultural centre, formed the Derby Little Theatre Club. They employed a small professional company to present repertory in a converted hall in an obscure street near the centre of the town. The distant aims of this first foundation were for gradual improvements in standards and the company was organised at first on strictly economical lines. Change of programme was to be weekly, and the small size of the hall meant performances had to be twice nightly. Company was kept to a minimum, with, of course, all stage management and often the director playing. Programme sellers and usherettes were voluntary workers and even the job of stage electrician was filled by means of a roster of amateur volunteers. The amateur electricians were replaced by a paid stage electrician (often a student) after about five years. Twice nightly performances were stopped when the theatre moved to a larger building. The programme sellers and usherettes are still voluntary. But the decision to make a weekly change of

PETER CHEESEMAN is manager of the Derby Playhouse.

programme remained the theatre's policy till the end of the 1959-60 season.

There had been an abortive start when the Club had tried a policy of rehearsing the company for a fortnight, playing twice nightly for a week, and then closing for the second week of rehearsal of each new production: this culminated in bankruptcy after a run of a few months.

Weekly repertory means that each play has about fifteen hours of rehearsal (the average West End show receives a minimum of eighty hours), on Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday and Saturday mornings. Artists study in the afternoons, and dress rehearse on Mondays. The pace of work means that nothing can be digested and understood, that the worst plays cannot be performed with much energy or polish, and the best given no more more than a shallow and superficial rendering. Rarely is there energy for imagination, for creation. Sometimes luck and hard work bring an almost improvised artistic success, but usually the artist manages to achieve very little more than a routine performance, which gives him no more than minimal satisfaction and the audience no more than minimal stimulus. The only justification for weekly repertory is that it keeps a live theatre running in a town where there would otherwise be none. And though its standards of production may be low, the material presented is very often of a higher quality than the consistent mediocrity of the average cinema or television programme. In Derby it has provided the only opportunity most local people have had of seeing great and good plays in their entirety and in the vital medium for which they were written: the Playhouse has presented Shaw, Sheridan, Priestley, O'Casey, Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller, Molière, Goldoni, Anouilh, Cocteau, Brecht and Ibsen as well as Agatha Christie and Lesley Storm.

The decision to remain a weekly company survived the theatre's first major step forward, a move to the present building which was converted to a theatre by means of a generous grant from the landlord and a loan from Derby Corporation. It also survived the second, which was the reconstruction after the disastrous fire of 1955, when the building was made into an intimate and very comfortable theatre, though unfortunately conservative in design. According to Mr. Charles Landstone's pamphlet on Civic Theatres, published by the Arts Council in 1952, a town with Derby's population could easily support a theatre of the Playhouse's capacity (four hundred) on fortnightly repertory. But the theatre had survived till then as a weekly company, and it apparently had a regular weekly following. The management naturally feared that a move calculated to double its production cost or halve its audience was a dangerous one. It should therefore only be taken *when full houses on weekly showed there was a demand for seats which an extension of the run would satisfy.* So in the sincere hope that this would happen, the weekly policy was pursued till last June.

During the first ten years of its life the theatre's box office takings and trading profits have been sufficient to keep it going only when supported by grants from industry, from the Derby Corporation, from the Arts Council, from Independent TV, by private donations, by gifts of equipment, by the club membership fees, and by a great deal of voluntary labour. Grants and loans have been absorbed in maintenance costs and rebuilding, as well as in making up seasonal losses. Expansion has been financed by *ad hoc* appeals. Running costs have been subsidised by voluntary and part-time labour (the stage

carpenter is only part-time at less than two hours a day. Sunday set-ups are accomplished by him with two part-time assistants who work as stage hands or flymen for set changes.) The programme of plays chosen has contained more classics and first rate plays than most weekly reps., but has been a cautious one with the majority of plays of the West End comedy or thriller type.

Just after the fire a renewal of interest led to some heartening large audiences; but gradually these have fallen off, till the 1958-59 and 1959-60 seasons called for some drastic staff economies, and ended in a steady series of losses after Easter 1960 of over £100 a week. By the end of the 1959-60 season the original three thousand enthusiasts had dwindled to some nine hundred club members of whom a good deal less than half supported the theatre regularly at all, and less than a quarter regularly once a week. Almost everything had been done in the past to keep the theatre going, but voluntary labour, loans, grants and appeals were showing themselves to be of little use in staving off what looked like imminent disaster, and it was at this point that the idea of becoming a fortnightly repertory company was reconsidered. The cautious policy of waiting for consistent profits was not working and the audiences were slowly but surely dwindling away. It was felt, hoped, that the only thing to do was to attack the centre of the problem, improve the standards of presentation by fortnightly rehearsals, and stand the risks that fortnightly runs might bring in the beginning. As an experiment, several productions during the 1959-60 season had been run for a fortnight; several others had been permitted fortnightly rehearsals by circumstances like the three-week run of the first Playhouse Pantomime, and the annual visit of the local amateur Shakespeare Society. The results had been observed carefully. The fortnightly runs showed no appreciable drop in audiences and seemed to indicate quite clearly that it was not just a regular weekly audience that was keeping the theatre going, but that there was a small core of weekly supporters and a very large audience that came at longer intervals. On the other hand the plays rehearsed for a fortnight were noticeably improved in standard; there was a marked response from the audience by the end of their runs, seeming to indicate that higher quality performances would really act as a draw. It was also realised that our audiences were growing accustomed to the standards of performance in television plays, which had much longer rehearsal periods, and were obviously not going to put up with shoddy work when they had standards of comparison.

So the decision was made to run at least an experimental period of fortnightly repertory for about six months at the start of the 1960-61 season, and if this proved successful, to carry on permanently on this basis. It was fully anticipated that the initial period would be very difficult and that it would be several months before the real results began to show in a response to the stimulus of higher quality productions. To our delight, however, the first three weeks of the season have brought staggeringly large houses, with the *House Full* board dusted and up for nights on end, an average capacity on the first show *(Roar Like a Dove)* of 87%, and the second (Agatha Christie's *The Unexpected Guest)* following suit. The audience has been a new one, and the initial problem of getting the word round appears to have been solved. We deliberately chose two plays which were almost guaranteed box office draws to start with, however, and know that when we carry on with Sacha Guitry's sophisti-

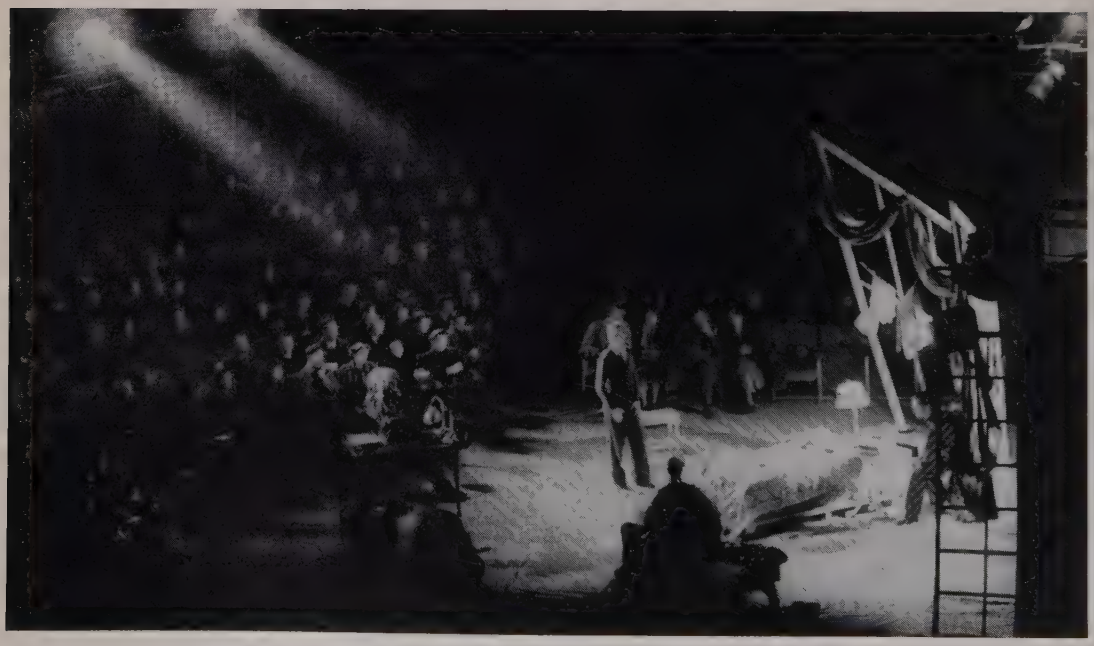
cated *Don't Listen Ladies,* Donald Ogden Stewart's *The Kidders,* and Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* (three plays that could have easily chalked up losses before) we will be on more difficult ground. But the first hurdle is passed.

The crises of the last years have brought about another slow change in policy that has been no less significant than the decision to go fortnightly. I do not think that there is any doubt that the original Little Theatre Club, like most provincial repertory theatres, was founded in order to cater for the tastes of a cultured minority. But the need to find the kind of audience that can support a reasonable size of professional theatre, and especially on fortnightly repertory, has meant that new sources of audience have to be tapped. Subsidy too is accompanied by a responsibility to use it to bring theatre of high quality to a wide audience. Finally the realisation, especially by young men just coming into the professional theatre, that there is a special need in a modern society dominated by synthetic mass-produced values, for the kind of real and vital experience that is the heart of theatre, has turned our attention out to the same problem and to a wide and endless, but exciting task.

At Derby, as at many other theatres, this has focussed on two central problems—that our audiences were predominantly middle class and middle aged. We are consequently trying as many schemes as we can to get young people into the theatre, and to attract the attention of the thousands of factory workers who do not go naturally to the theatre any more, and draw them into our audience. So far, our attention has been concentrated on the first problem. Last season we managed to expand the number of our organised school matinées, and revived a Club for young people, membership of which gave half price tickets on the door, and admission to other interesting activities. We ran three experimental Theatre Afternoons, demonstrating the techniques of rehearsal and stage management. Our Young Playgoers Club membership rose rapidly to five hundred. This season we are planning a comprehensive programme of Theatre Afternoons, a recital group to tour the schools, more school matinées, and, we hope, a fit-up tour of country schools while the theatre is occupied by amateurs for a fortnight. We have thrown membership of the Young Playgoers Club open to all young people between thirteen and twenty and included full time students of any age. One advantage of the ticket concession is that it encourages attendance by members as part of an adult audience; and apprentices, young shop assistants, police cadets, as well as schoolboys and girls from secondary modern and grammar schools, are making use of it. The problem of approaching the industries is a large one, and has many difficulties. We are concentrating on making it very easy for the factory worker to book seats, and trying by publicity to overcome the definite class barrier that keeps many of them out of the theatre.

We started this work as a weekly repertory company. Now we are fortnightly, and many problems are eased, especially the crucial one—that it takes most of the time of a small staff just to turn over each production. We now have the time and energy to tackle new problems. If it is to survive, a theatre must progress, it must improve its quality, it must break new ground. We have tried to put our faith in this doctrine.

Two photographs showing the strong visual backgrounds possible in Arena Theatre presentation.
Top—a setting for "Pygmalion" by Anthony Waller [Photo : Lacey's Studios
Bottom—a setting for "Man and Superman" by Feliks Topolski



Two photographs showing the relationship of actors and audience in the Arena Theatre.
Top—"Little Foxes" in the tented theatre. [Photo : Birmingham Post
Bottom—"Crime Passionelle" in the indoor theatre, Northumberland Hall, Newcastle on Tyne.

A New Deal for the Theatre—II

JOHN ENGLISH

In a series of two illustrated articles John English, Director of the Arena Theatre Company, reviews modern British theatre structure and practice. In this article he describes his own work with the Arena Theatre Company, and compares it with other experiments in theatrical form.

In the first part of this article I argued the need for a fundamental reconsideration of the nature of the live theatrical performance, and the relationship of player and audience and of both to the occasion that brings them together.

I said that it seemed to me surprising that so little full scale experimental work had been undertaken, and began to describe the basic reasoning on which the work of the Arena Theatre Company has been based. Now let me take you step by step through the planning of the theatre in which we have conducted full scale experiments throughout the whole of the nineteen fifties. Seen at this distance, the reasoning appears somewhat naive, but it was an honest attempt at a synthesis. Here is some of the reasoning :—

The principal object of the theatrical occasion must surely be the re-creation of the drama, so we must begin by providing a space in which the play can be re-enacted. This we will call the playing space. We must define it in some way, so we will describe a circle.

The object of bringing live actors and live audience together is to share the occasion. Each have their contribution to make. There must be no doubt in the minds of either that the occasion is a joint one. To make this clear, we will put them under the same ceiling—that is in the same room.

Audience and actors have come together to concentrate on the drama to be re-created. We will, therefore, place the drama at the physical and psychological centre of their joint presence—at the centre of the room.

In these three steps we have arrived at—a circular room with a circular playing space at the centre—an audience with actors in the middle of them—actors with audience around them. *(See Fig. 1.)*

Fig. 1
Form and proportions of fundamental Arena playhouse.

The reasoning of the next step is complicated and rather mystical, I fear.

The drama needs enveloping, not only by the real world represented by the audience, but by the imagined theatrical world, the background of the events and the persons in the drama. We must, therefore, share out the space surrounding the playing space between the real world—the audience —and the theatrical world.

We have to decide on the relative distribution of this space; this is a complex

decision, involving " felt " assumptions not very susceptible to reasoning. Here are some of my assumptions :—

The real world should dominate the imagined one, so that values and judgments are more likely to be referred to reality than to fantasy.

The actor should be aware that he is contained within the audience, that he is working with them, inside them—not at them, from a remote dominating imagined world.

The audience should be aware that they are participating in a drama contained and sustained within their willing presence; they should not feel they are observing happenings in another remote, detached world.

With such considerations in mind, I decided to allocate the space enveloping the drama in the approximate proportion of three quarters to the reality of the audience, and one quarter to the imaginary theatrical world.

We now have a more defined shape for our playhouse; a circular stage with the audience on three sides, on the fourth side a theatrical world.

Now let us consider the structure of our new playhouse in more detail. We will begin with the playing space; it was conceived as having inner and outer elements. Provision was made so that the inner area could be isolated from the auditorium by a curtain. This was required primarily for aesthetic reasons—to make possible such dramatic devices as revelation, residual tension, emotional release etc.—it also meant that the inner stage could be re-set in private. The outer area was intended to be used sometimes as additional playing space linking the actor physically with the audience, at other times as a gentle separating space, a kind of shallow psychological moat. This last conception was thought to be of some importance when dealing with some nineteeth and twentieth century drama.

Let us turn our attention to size. The playing space—the whole theatre—was to be designed around people; first dimensions were thought of in human terms. For instance, the inner circular playing space was made four strides from centre to edge —about a twenty four foot diameter circle. The peripheral moat was made three strides wide, thus making approximately a forty two foot diameter circle for the total playing area. The audience were placed in concentric arcs, set one stride apart. Practical experiments were undertaken to try and establish limits of distance within which the feeling of 'belonging' between actor and audience could be maintained. Such experiments must obviously be imprecise, but it was finally considered that for someone experiencing the occasion from the audience side to be more than twelve rows away from the action produced a feeling of detachment; on the other hand the actor had a feeling of losing contact with people sitting more than ten rows away. The maximum permissible number of seat rows in the auditorium seemed thus to be somewhere in the region of ten or twelve.

Now for elevations. To begin with there appeared no justification for placing the playing space anywhere other than on the level floor. After the first year's work, it appeared that some architectural definition would be valuable between the inner and outer playing areas. To achieve this, the outer zone was maintained at zero level, but the central zone was raised one foot—at last we could call it a stage. The inner and outer zones were joined by one tread six inches high, fifteen inches wide.

From the outset the first seat deck was raised six inches above the outer playing

area, for architectural definition. Each subsequent seat row was raised to the extent needed to give acceptable vertical sight lines. The line of vision aimed for was that of a natural angle of rest when viewing objects at mid-distance; this was considered to be about fifteen degrees below the horizontal.

Relative positions, space distribution and size had now been decided; one further principle had to be accepted—the need for unity of feeling in the auditorium; it was considered imperative that all the audience should be seated in the single bowl; that is to say that there should be no balcony.

As for technical equipment, the playhouse was intended to make use of any device available. The theatrical world was to be equipped as any modern stage house, with grid, wagon stages, revolving stages, all capable of projection on to the stage proper. The inner and outer stages could be separated by a front curtain running on a circular track. The theatrical world could be set with any practical or visual aids the drama might need or find helpful for interpretation.

The basic structure of a new playhouse had now been designed. It had been done without conscious reference to traditional ideas and practices. The new playhouse was intended to serve a large part of the theatre's past and present literature, and to enable mid-twentieth century actors, audiences and dramatists to make the most of their experiences together. *Fig. 2* shows what it looked like.

It will be seen at once that the result of all this effort has been to re-invent the form of the classical Greek theatre. This twentieth century Arena Theatre is of course very much smaller (ten rows seating about five hundred people, twelve rows about seven hundred — some Greek theatres, we are told, could seat as many as twenty thousand people.)

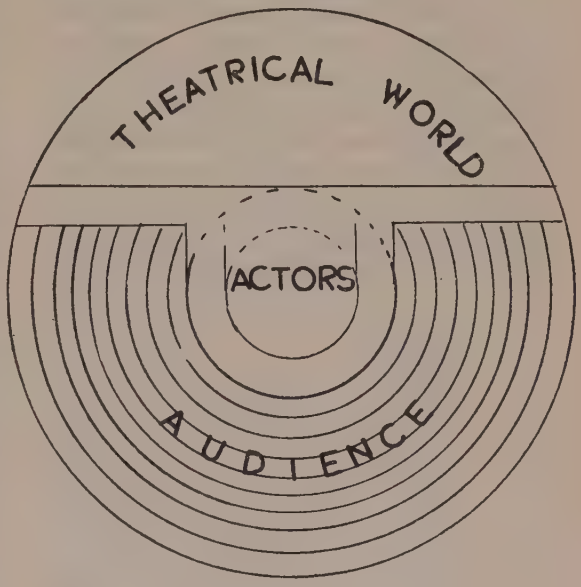


Fig. 2
Basic plan of developed Arena Theatre design —a circular playhouse with the playing space at the true centre; audience and theatrical outer world enclosing the playing space.

When you examine the size of the new Arena playhouse, you find also that it is very close to what we know of the Elizabethan playhouse. These two similarities of form and size are interesting and instructive. There is one feature that is common to all three, a similar degree of embracement of the actor by the audience. This relationship may well prove to be a fundamental truth of the art. At all events the new playhouse is in very good company with two of the most successful forms of theatre in the drama's long history.

I have thought it worth while to trace out step by step the way in which the Arena experimental playhouse design was built up. It has often been described as a compromise between a theatre-in-the-round and a proscenium arch theatre; I

hope I have been able to make it clear that it is in conception nothing of the sort. To think of it in that way, is dangerous and the beginning of a whole new complex of confusions.

Let me now trace, as rapidly as possible, the transformation of the theoretical plan into a full scale experimental playhouse. The first difficulty proved to be a lack of suitable buildings of the right proportions in which the desired stage and auditorium

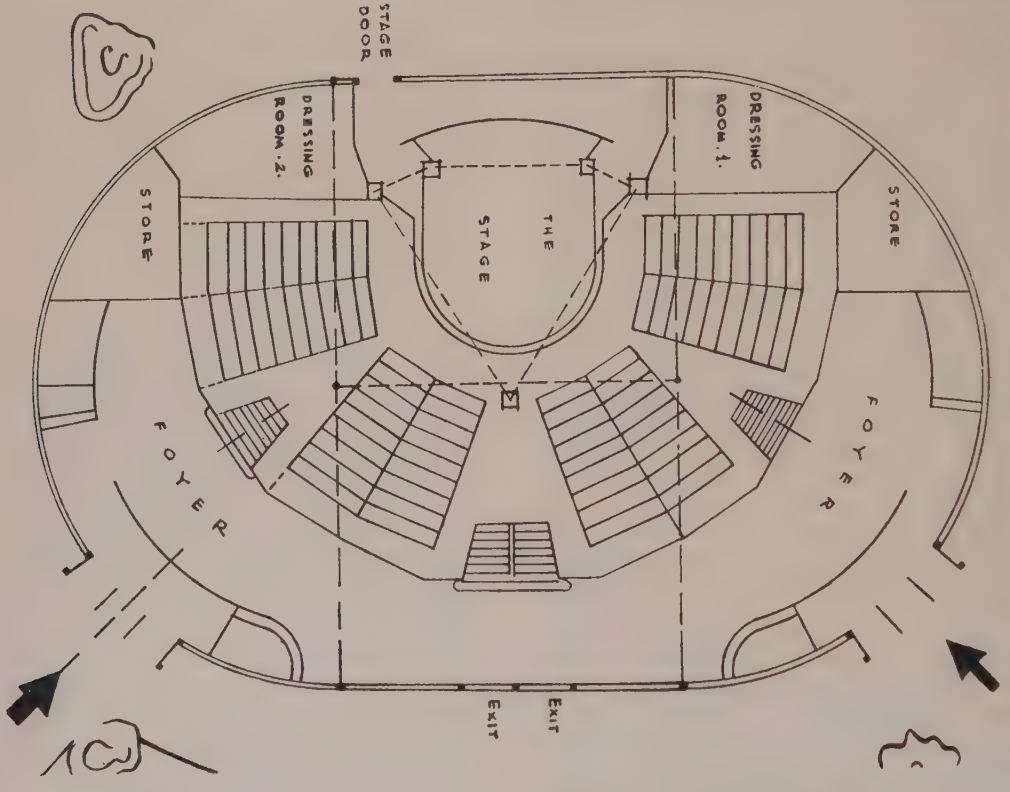


Fig. 3 *Plan showing an Arena Theatre layout in a circus tent.*

structures could be erected. To this day we have not found a really suitable existing building in which the whole of a twelve row auditorium structure could be erected. The Northumberland Hall in Newcastle on Tyne, where the Arena Theatre has been used each winter since 1950, is the most satisfactory so far, but even this cuts away six rows at the centre.

It occurred to me that we might find a suitable envelope for the theatre in a circus tent, and this proved to be the case. Each summer since 1948 the Arena Theatre Big Top has been erected in the grounds of Cardiff Castle and in Cannon Hill Park in Birmingham. The auditorium structure, used in the Big Top, has been adapted from a German circus of the 1920s. The winter auditorium structure, used at Newcastle on Tyne, is built on a different principle, using a series of interlocking folding rostra. The plan of the theatre is basically the same in the summer and winter versions; the stage

rig and technical equipment are common to both. *(See Fig. 3.)*

In twelve years the experimental Arena Playhouse has been used by many hundreds of actors and by audiences totalling well over a million. In general the repertoire has been chosen more for the problems to be explored than because the piece was thought to be well suited to the form. This means, for instance, that we have so far avoided the Greek Theatre; and the Elizabethans are represented only by three Shakespeare pieces.

Our object has been to study plays of contrasting periods and styles in groups. In each group we try to include one classic play from the English theatre and one international classic; two modern plays—one a typical proscenium play and the other one with more claims to universality. In addition we always try to include one play for very young audiences. Only a complete list of productions, I fear, would indicate the range that has been found possible in the new playhouse.

How far has the new playhouse design succeeded ? The first thing to be said is that the Arena Theatre " works ". From the outset it has been found acceptable as a valid, workable playhouse; one of the first surprises was that it caused no great surprise. This easy acceptance is an important point, but can we claim any positive virtues ? Well, the Arena Theatre certainly has atmosphere, it is an " exciting " theatre in spite of the unpromising conditions sometimes prevailing in an experimental set-up; that is a good start for the theatrical occasion. It has certainly provided new inspiration to actors, directors, designers and above all to audiences. How difficult it is to remember that the theatre exists for the audience; it is highly significant that at a time when provincial theatres generally stand at their lowest ebb, Arena Theatre audiences have reached bursting point. Audiences are drawn from the whole range of social groups and from all ages. Of course there are other factors beyond the design of the theatre that have produced this box office result, but it is the theatre that has provided the new inspiration.

I don't know that there is any great value in detailed discussion of the Arena Theatre productions. The artistic side of a theatre's work should be experienced, not talked about. The plays are there for all to see.

One general point is probably worth making. Often we have lacked the means to do things as well as they ought to have been done, and yet it can truthfully be said that Arena presentation has always brought some new quality to a play—uncovered some unsuspected value or truth. This is no myth, it has been happening year in and year out. The new revelation is experienced by actors, directors and above all by audiences. It is this revealing quality of the Arena playhouse, its value as a keen, interpretative tool, that strikes me as being its greatest contribution so far.

What about style ? The company was set up primarily to explore the production of many different kinds of play in a new playhouse. It was not its function in the first instance to develop a new style—that would have prejudged the issue. In the last four or five years, however, a new style has begun to emerge. It is characterised, I believe, by a directness and clarity in interpretation, by visual freshness, simplicity and vigour, by subtle yet direct, unsmudged acting, and by a returning vocal and physical assurance in the actors; the Arena has certainly emerged as an actor's theatre.

When we began, we were looking for a

playhouse that would give everyone an inescapable sense of belonging to the occasion and to each other; we have found such a playhouse. We were hoping to find a theatre that would take a very wide range of drama; that also we have found. We were looking for an intimate theatre in which the actor could practise new subtle techniques; the actor can play with great subtlety in the Arena, but in practice it has turned out to be more "theatrical," more extrovert, than I had originally imagined; this I can see now may be all to the good.

I have spent all this time on the Arena Theatre project, not because I am silly enough to believe it is the only playhouse for our time, but because I passionately believe it to be an example of the kind of fundamental approach that is desperately needed. Now let us turn to other experiments, those of Stephen Joseph and Bernard Miles.

Theatre-in-the-round has been practised for many years in America, but we had to wait for Stephen Joseph and the Studio Theatre Company to introduce it to us here on a professional basis. This was in 1955.

Theatre-in-the-round is most usually theatre-in-a-square—it is the actor who is seen in the round. The stage is a simple cloth or carpet placed on a flat floor; the auditorium a series of open rostra arranged in tiers on four sides of a medium sized room; no separating curtain; a minimum of stage trimmings and properties; complete openness about technical equipment such as lighting equipment and complete openness about entrances through the audience. The work of the Studio Theatre Company has been of great value in showing us what happens when you strip the theatrical occasion down to the bare minimum; it has heightened our awareness of what is essential and what is not. I believe it will help to improve the quality of acting and the simplicity and integrity of writing. The minimal physical arrangements required are great practical attractions and may well prove to be of considerable value in sustaining or reviving live theatre in difficult circumstances; for instance, the work now being done by Stephen Joseph in the Potteries, and the way in which the Pembroke Theatre is keeping the flag flying in Croydon.

There is something very salutary about the austere atmosphere of theatre-in-the-round; on the other hand some people find it rather consciously clinical. Though most of the work so far has been done on a small scale, there seems no theoretical reason why the audience could not be expanded to a more economical size. It is to my mind the loss of a specifically theatrical outer world that is theatre-in-the-round's greatest deprivation. In the light of what I conceive to be the nature of the art, I think it is a fundamental mistake to eliminate this outer world. I suspect that, before very long, the playing area in theatres-in-the-round will move off centre, until they establish their own exclusive theatrical background.

We must all be profoundly grateful to Bernard Miles for his phenomenal theatre at Puddle Dock. We should all recognise that Mermaid number three is an entirely different kettle of fish from numbers one and two. Puddle Dock is a genuine twentieth-century theatre and is going to explore for us many problems and possibilities. One of the most interesting things will be to see how the open stage works with the actors and audience in frontal opposition, not involved with one another as for instance at Mermaid number two—the Royal Exchange.

The second issue of great interest is, I think, that of size. Mermaid III has almost twice as many rows of seats as I believe to

be practical for most modern drama. One of the interesting side issues that has emerged from the Arena Theatre project, is that you can have a theatre seating seven hundred people with everyone sitting in the first twelve rows of the stalls; Mermaid III has five hundred seats, but it goes back so far and rises so high, that I suspect Bernard Miles has built himself an epic theatre. I have suggested that Guthrie's theatre is an epic theatre, but Guthrie's theatre has two thousand seats, enough to support epic productions. Can the Mermaid support an epic style with only five hundred seats ? We shall have to wait and see.

Let us return to where we began. The theatre is to get a new deal, we are going to build new theatres. Each theatre we build is likely to cost at least a quarter of a million pounds; are we ready to spend our money to the best advantage ? I am pretty sure we are not.

I have always thought it remarkable that, whilst the Arena Theatre and other experiments have been fortunate in attracting public money to support actual performances—public enjoyment, that is—we have had to rely on private contributions for the experiments themselves and the research accompanying it. With adequate research resources, we could have done much more. More important, what we have been doing could have been of more general use. The Arena archives now contain records of twelve years' work and more than sixty productions. They fill a fair sized room; alas, all this information remains accessible only to a few.

Experimental adjustable theatres, such as the Arena, could help to solve in a practical way and on a full scale many problems of modern theatre architecture. We could avoid the necessity of transferring theoretical ideas straight from the drawing board into unalterable steel and concrete. I think it was Allardyce Nicoll who once suggested to me that modern theatre licensing laws, which made theatre buildings virtually indestructible, had done more than anything else to halt the development of playhouse form. When theatres burnt down frequently, we did see some change. For good or ill the virtually indestructible theatre has come to stay and the theatres we build in the next ten years are likely to see us into the twenty-first century. For goodness' sake, let us be sure what we are about, before we build them.

Copies of the July Issue of "New Theatre Magazine", containing the first part of this article, may be obtained from the publishers, price 2/- plus 6d. postage and packing.

Plays for Children

BRIAN WAY

In his article in the April issue of *New Theatre Magazine* John Allen, writing of the young audience, drew attention to the importance of drama as a part of general education. For theatre people as well as for educationists this growth should be of vital interest; for if the educationist is concerned with the quality of tomorrow's people, the theatre is concerned with that

BRIAN WAY is director of the London Children's Theatre Company.

aspect of people which leads them to demand the enrichment of the arts as part of their ever increasing leisure time. Some educationists are now well aware that " culture " cannot be stuck on to a human being as an afterthought in the final year at school; and theatre people, one hopes, are becoming increasingly aware that the 3% of the population that visit the theatre with any regularity are by and large of a particular kind, so that the inducements and seductions of theatre must reach out to the other 97% through broad experiment and enterprise. If this breadth of vision is not found, then the situation will arise in a few generations where the educationists will have succeeded, partly through a wider use of the arts in education, in producing " cultured " people who require theatre in their life, but not the kind of theatre that so many commercial managements insist on clinging to —and I do not here imply a criticism of type of play so much as shape of theatre, attitude of managements, atmosphere in buildings, etc. These are some of the fundamentals that need to undergo change, and are beginning to do so.

Children's Theatre can play—and, I believe, is trying to play—a vital role in this gradually unfolding process. It is a natural link at every level—child, teacher, artist, management, education officer—between the two worlds of theatre and education. Mr. Allen rightly speaks of the dichotomy that exists between the two worlds, but necessary co-operation will come only from the theatre taking an interest in and reaching some understanding of children and education; there is evidence that such co-operation is both practicable and far reaching in its mutual benefits, but the first step in the relationship can most easily be taken by Children's Theatre Managements.

Children's Theatre is so young an art that its form and function are far from being categorically settled, and the opportunity exists for continuous experiment and observation. But there are important indications arising from the evidence of many people's work over the last twenty years.

Let us examine some of these indications :—

There is evidence that the proscenium theatre is not necessarily the best form for children of any age, and certainly wrong for those under eleven years. And this is a clear and simple example of the necessity for Children's Theatres to understand something of the intentions and processes of education. If teachers encourage young children to create their own form of simple drama, that drama is not theatre but an extension of play; its basic qualities are sincerity and personal use of imagination. However, if young children see proscenium theatre, there is a tendency for them to lose their own ability for simple imaginative play that is sincere, and instead to play at being actors acting a play. But if they see performances played on the floor space in some open-stage arrangement, using the shapes children themselves use, then the experience can be an enrichment and lead to an extension of their activities, without destroying sincerity or undermining confidence that their own way of doing things is valid.

There is evidence that the open-stage form of theatre is best suited to many older children, too; certainly that they prefer the conditions of intimacy which enable them to feel closely related to the play, rather than try to accept the distant illusion of a remote picture-frame stage.

And arising from the above points, there is evidence that performances for young people are most successful (in the sense of

sharing experience) when the audience is not larger than about three to four hundred so arranged that no one is far from the acting area. Small wonder, then, that Children's Theatre groups are beset with economic problems.

There is evidence that performances in the child's own environment—i.e. the school hall—are perhaps more valuable in the long run than those given to children taken in parties to a theatre; this again is particularly true of the young child whose sense of "community" is limited—and surely we should hope gradually to inculcate the thought that theatre can be as much an integral part of "community" as is a shopping centre, a park, a cinema, or a public swimming bath.

There is evidence that the form of presentation and type of script for children, at any rate up to the age of eleven, should include audience participation, a subject of wide controversy varying from indignation at the "rape of illusion" to a kind of fetish. The simple fact is that young children are fundamentally *doers* and not watchers; if they are absorbed in the story of a play, there will be some characters they like very much, others they dislike—the former they will wish to help and, with a little encouragement, will offer either vocal or physical help; the latter they will similarly try to thwart. There is no misbehaviour in such efforts — they are genuine and sincere. But they can swiftly be turned into a riot of robust hysteria if there is not some degree of *logically intended opportunity* within the form of production and the writing of the play, and if the actors are not sensitive, imaginative or flexible enough to incorporate the participation when it comes. This kind of "logical participation" has nothing to do with the "gimmick" song sheet, or the comic who indulges in mutual abuse with his audience. Nor does it require of actors a necessity to "play down to the kiddies." I am often asked by an actor who has never before played in Children's Theatre: "What adjustments must I make to allow for children?" My answer never varies—"Rehearse and play as though you were in a production of *Hamlet* at Stratford." A deep absorption in the play as a whole, a fine sincerity of characterisation, close and detailed team work, and an acute sensitivity to the young audience with whom one shares the play—these are the simple but exacting requirements of actors in Children's Theatre.

The more so is this because there is evidence that just as forms of open stage theatre are best suited to child audiences, so too is complete simplicity of setting; little or no scenery is required as this can tend to take away concentration from the people involved; lighting is quite unnecessary for the younger child, and although an enrichment, not a fundamental necessity for older ones. Costumes need to be simple and unfussy, with bold colour and sometimes symbolical usage.

Where young children are to be involved in audience participation, the less theatrical clutter there is the better will be the results; indeed, recent experiments suggest that theatre-in-the-round, with no scenery except a few simple rostrum blocks is the best condition in which to work as this makes it possible for the actor always to be ready for entirely spontaneous participation, which in some cases may even necessitate the cutting of a whole scene. If three hundred voices show particular concern for a character, it is *illogical* to try to shut them up simply because there is a scene to do that has been rehearsed—so illogical that it amounts to rank bad children's theatre. The scene can be dispensed with, and complete control of

the audience participation achieved.

It is constantly argued that such "interventions" spoil the play and are quite superfluous — and some producers insist that *emotional* participation is just as valid as vocal or physical participation. Of course!—but we cannot demand that young natures conform to our requirements simply because we like or are used to our actors being divorced from the audience, and the simple truth of young people's nature is that if they are involved emotionally, there will be a vocal and physical outlet for the emotion, often quite spontaneously and unconsciously—and the more absorbed they are in the story the more likely is this to happen.

Audience participation for teenagers, who are ready in themselves for something nearer to direct theatre experience, still requires a great deal of experiment, but is clearly an enrichment for *some,* though at a more conscious and rehearsed level than the spontaneity of younger ones. Perhaps it is unfortunate that, although this is the age group for whom educationists consider experience of theatre to be of some importance, the *kind* of experience is usually hide-bound by vested interests—dramatised classics, Shakespeare and other examination material are so often demanded. Inevitably the actual material is only too often boring for the teenager—inevitably and also tragically, because the teenager will show an interest in a very wide variety of content if his own primary interests are first considered. What are these interests? It would take an article on its own to touch on these in any detail, but briefly one can suggest that they are bound up with *real* people, their struggles and feelings and thoughts and actions, and much of the "why" of all these facets. The shape of the theatre has an effect on concentration—so that the more difficult the content the more simple, direct, sincere and intimate needs to be the presentation. Actors need to know and understand how their audience feels and the reason for certain kinds of disarming reaction (e.g. laughter at costume of another period.) From such understanding can arise a bond with the audience instead of the kind of resentment that leads to an attitude of "Let's speed it up and get the wretched performance over as soon as possible." Artistic and human integrity are vital factors when playing to young teenagers.

I have suggested that there is evidence for Children's Theatre to be considered from certain viewpoints. Now, the fact is that there is hardly a playhouse in the country that has been built in a way that makes any likelihood of these requirements being fulfilled. (On the other hand, a successful production of a play specially written for children was presented by the Library Theatre, Manchester, using steps down from the stage to the auditorium, thus allowing contact with the audience, chases, processions etc., and so compromising between proscenium and open stage theatre.) The school hall, however, can provide the requirements and for this among other reasons, the London Children's Theatre Companies play only in schools, during school hours, to controlled sizes of audience, and under the direct auspices either of the Local Education Authority or of individual Head Teachers. Both companies play ten performances per week (usually 10 a.m. and 2 p.m. daily, Monday to Friday), for three tours a year of approximately 12 weeks per tour, which are arranged by correspondence or personal visits by the Management.

The actors—not more than eight per company, with an average age of 23 or 24—are engaged on an Equity contract, are fully trained (except for the few whose standard

is high without this,) and many of them have had several years' experience in theatre. Each artist is engaged to stage manage as well as to act, and there is evidence that agents and managements are beginning to accept children's theatre as a valid part of the artists' career.

The economic aspect of the work is so tight that actors cannot be paid what they deserve for such arduous pioneering work; nevertheless, salaries in a company such as this are comparable with the majority of repertory companies. The London Children's Theatre works to a budget that is so limited that the loss or lack of three performances in a twelve-week tour can make the difference between balance and loss on that period. The normal fee for one performance is £17 10s. (£175 per week, or 350 children @ 1/- per performance), and one company cannot exist without some form of subsidy. This company has been fortunate enough to receive generous grants over the last two years from the Nuffield Foundation; without these, the work would have ceased two years ago—with the grants, the opportunity has been made for the work to build to a point of comparative security.

What of tomorrow ?

It is always tempting to claim that Children's Theatre is securing our audiences of tomorrow—but there is no evidence to support this. My personal view is that this apparent failure has little to do with how often or when young people visit a theatre, but is a root indication of the need for change in *adult* theatre. Possibly the imaginative, simple and sincere form of theatre offered to children may make them interested in theatre-going as adults, if there is an imaginative, simple and sincere adult theatre in their locality. This is a challenge to the theatre, not to its audience. The challenge to education is being met in the day-by-day trends towards a greater understanding of the part the arts can play in the education of the full person.

I would suggest six pressing needs for the immediate future :—

1. That interested people in both theatre and education seek every degree of mutual co-operation on a broad, generous and experimental basis, in order to understand each other's work and point of view.
2. That repertory companies seek the advice of existing children's theatres as to how young audiences can be approached, and contact any such company that may visit their particular area, so that the children's theatre group can help to interest secondary schools in their own local theatre. Such exchange between school and theatre is of paramount importance. Children's Theatre Companies can often bridge the gap.
3. That drama schools give some thought to the factor of Children's Theatre as part of the training of actors and actresses.
4. That education officers seek out companies of integrity and offer them some financial security for a broad measure of experimental work.
5. That theatre directors seek out education officers and teachers and try to interest them in the fact of theatre as part of their community (some, of course, do so already.)
6. That actors from local companies should visit secondary schools to chat informally to young people about the theatre, helping such people to realise that the actor is as much part of the community as the doctor, the dentist, the plumber or the greengrocer. (Of course, it will be necessary for some actors to adjust their own anti-social

philosophy to this viewpoint — but theatre as a whole will prosper from such adjustments.)

The cardinal factor is the child—and what is best for the child, not what we would like, from vested interests, to think as best for it. When this factor is given the importance due to it, exciting results can be achieved.

Book Reviews

Menander's Dyskolos, translated into English Prose. By W. G. Arnott. (University of London, the Athlone Press, 5s.)

Menander's language ranges from the dignified to the colloquial. He is not easy to translate into contemporary English. And we do not take easily to the delicate artificiality of his subject matter. Mr. Arnott has produced a workmanlike translation. He would not wish to claim to have done more than that.

Space only allows me to comment on one point. He remarks in his introduction that Menander's loosely built verse has been turned into "modern English prose that can be spoken on the stage." The implication of this is certainly wrong. The play needs verse. The style is anyhow artificial, and the colloquialisms would present no difficulties to someone who had read Auden. Mr. Arnott is impossibly slow. Knemon's *"O polypletheias ochthlou"* —literally "What a supercolossal crowd," or perhaps "This isn't Wembley Stadium" —is rendered "Oh there are far too many people in this world, far too many people." This is not an isolated example; and it would have been prevented by verse. He sometimes leaves out images. A word meaning "on the trail together" is translated "having a private discussion." (I don't deny that this is the word's *sense* in the context.) And when the Greek metre changes to trochaics, which indicates dancing, the result is not only ludicrous but also a distortion of the play's meaning. The baiting of Knemon is a crazy dance. In cold prose it appears almost sadistic, which I feel certain was not Menander's intention. I doubt whether it is really Mr. Arnott's. Lastly, if this is an avowedly contemporary translation, why must characters invoke Zeus and Apollo ? Surely our language is, if nothing else, rich enough in swearwords.

LEO AYLEN

Ibsen : Volume VI : An Enemy of the People, The Wild Duck, Rosmersholm. Translated and edited by J. W. McFarlane. (Oxford, 464 pages, 25s.)

This is the first volume of a new series of translations of all Ibsen's plays, and the choice of the contents has been dictated by Mr. McFarlane's conception of these selections as a continuum of transitional matter extending between two 'periods' of the playwright's working life, a thesis which he develops persuasively in his introduction. The volume contains also Ibsen's preliminary drafts of two of the plays (three drafts of *Rosmersholm;* two of *The Wild Duck)* and commentaries on all the included works. The commentaries comprise notes on the dates of composition, draft manuscripts, contemporary reception and pronouncements of the author. The

latter are of special interest in the light of Ibsen's legendary reticence on the subject of his creative process, and his germinal ruminations on *The Wild Duck* are entirely fascinating. Mr. McFarlane includes tables to illustrate the development of character-names through the various drafts. An appendix on Ibsen productions in English (stage, radio and television) and a select bibliography round off the volume. The format is generous and the book appears to have the sturdiness necessary to resist the wear and tear imposed upon any edition intended for acting and broadcasting and not simply for the general reader.

The potential value of this series is so obvious as to make extended comment superfluous. Enough to say that it will provide a basic compendium of knowledge of the Ibsen canon which must otherwise be hunted for at large. Of greater importance is the fact that translation by one hand of all the plays will afford the first opportunity since that presented by Archer to assess the relative merits of Ibsen's work on a unified ground.

These translations are also available in individual titles at 5/- a copy.

HARRY THOMPSON

The Living Shakespeare. Edited by Robert Gittings. (Heinemann, 154 pages, 12s 6d.)
The Living Theatre. By Elmer Rice (Heinemann, 306 pages, 21s.)

"The general reader"—I have never met this voracious person, but I assume he is the Man in the Street (always ignorant, poor chap, but always thirsting for knowledge) when wet weather drives him indoors—is catered for by these two publications. And if such a person exists, there is a place for both on his bookshelves, in the section marked " Theatre " (somewhere between Thaumaturgy and Thermodynamics ?) Both are readable and written by experts, and they will be valuable acquisitions for anyone who knows *absolutely nothing* about either Shakespeare or the theatre.

The first book is by far the slighter of the two. It is " closely based on a series of talks given under the same title on Network Three of the British Broadcasting Corporation," and is really a number of knowledgeable chats about various aspects of Shakespeare's life and works, by many of the foremost modern experts on him. For instance there is an essay called " Shakespeare's Poetry " by David Daiches; what it contains is an analysis—brilliantly done—of one sonnet and one passage from Hamlet. Some of these chats are very good; there is L. C. Knights on his Imagery, and Michael Macowan on his Theatre, and most of the participants play down the tendency to become avuncular which unhappily overcomes J. Dover Wilson : " Librarians of the British Museum and other scholars who knew about sixteenth and seventeenth century books — bibliographers we call them . . . " The General Reader is assumed to require neither an index nor suggestions for further reading; but there are plenty of long quotations in case he has no access to the Complete Works.

The Living Theatre is a book which even the pedigree specialist ought to take a look at; it has as its thesis that artistic achievement in the theatre is closely related to its social and economic background, and Mr. Rice draws on his own rich experience for evidence to support this. But he has at the back of his mind an unfortunate image of the General Reader, approaching an unfamiliar subject like a tourist entering a foreign city and clamouring for a guide-book which tells you simply *everything ;* the book suffers from a tendency towards compendiousness. Mr. Rice spends three

long chapters describing the Theatre in Japan, (with a digression on the Chinese Theatre, from which he "came away with a feeling of boredom, disappointment, and puzzlement,") the Theatre in the Soviet Union, and the Theatre in England, all full of short, cautious and sometimes questionable generalisations; it is only when he is on home ground that the book becomes good reading. There are some engrossing first-hand examples of "the artists' preoccupation with the merchandising of his wares"; he obtained permission from Bernard Shaw to perform *The Shewing-up of Blanco Posnet* in New York, "but only after a long correspondence (conducted by Shaw, in longhand, on post cards) dealing with terms and conditions." An account of the part he played in the Federal Theatre Project, a tragically short-lived attempt during the depression to spread good theatre, with Government aid, to every city in the States; an argument that theatre in New York is a "hazardous" branch of the real-estate business; a vigorous description of the stifling trade-union regulations that bedevil American production; the story of the fantastic and chaotic conditions under which his play *Street Scene* was put on under the management of William A. Brady: "It was a standard joke on Broadway that Brady had only one set of scenery, which he had repainted for each new production, and that if he failed to find a play suitable to the scenery, he would commission one to be written"—when one comes across these passages one can only echo the words with which Mr. Guppy greeted Esther Summerson of Bleak House: "This is indeed an Oasis."

M.J.A.

Correspondence

Dear Sir,

It has occurred to me that my article in the July issue of *New Theatre Magazine* may have been less than fair to the founder of this company, John Hale. In the space available I could only deal with the complicated events of the two and a half years since I myself came here but I should like, if you would permit, to make the following points clear.

Without the initiative, enthusiasm and skill of John Hale during the first three years this company would not exist and everything that has been developed since has owed a great deal to the secure foundation which he created.

Furthermore, without his courage and enterprise in taking the first step by supplying productions to Loughborough every third week the later additions to the partnership could not have taken place.

When I referred to the first six months of the tours as "lopsided, uneconomic and in many ways unsatisfactory" I was not in any way criticising these arrangements. There was no other way in which the tours could have started but the point I wanted to make was that it was essential that we should progress to the next stage as quickly as possible in order to reap the full benefit.

I hope that the above will correct any unfair impression I may have created of the work done by a man for whom I have the greatest respect and admiration and whose achievements will always be remembered with gratitude by theatre-lovers in Lincoln.

Yours sincerely,
HAROLD LANDER.

Theatre Royal,
Lincoln.

27th July, 1960

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